

ETHICAL ISSUES FOR THE STUDY OF HUMAN BEHAVIOUR BY PSYCHOLOGISTS

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INTRODUCTION

Most of the research in psychology studies human behaviour. This is done in a variety of ways, including experiments, observations, and interviews. This monograph is about the ethical issues involved in such research with human participants.

Ethics are both methodological and moral issues, and are part of the issue of treating participants as objects or as people (Kelman 1967).

"When psychologists agonise about deception or the depersonalisation of those they treat like objects, however, they then find themselves faced with the (to them) unbearable prospect of being open about the hypotheses and giving the game away"
(Banister et al 1994 p5).

"While the ethical implications of research procedures were once the province only of the researcher's own values and integrity, they are now guided by published principles of ethical research" (Geller 1978 pp219-20).

In Britain, the British Psychological Society (BPS) "Code of Conduct Ethical Principles and Guidelines" (1991) forms the basis of how to treat human participants during research. This is a revision of the original "Ethical Principles for Research with Human Subjects" (1978). The new guidelines are meant to cover more than just research, but also practising psychologists as well. The guidelines are intended to apply at all levels of psychology: from the GCSE or A Level student doing research for their coursework through to the Professor of a Psychology Department at a university. In the USA, there are similar guidelines produced by the American Psychological Association (APA).

It is often assumed that there are ethical issues with the experimental method only. But there are ethical concerns with all methods of research. Table 1 outlines ethical issues that are relevant or not to some non-experimental methods. While Table 2 gives examples of ethical issues in the different areas of psychology.

COVERT PARTICIPATION OBSERVATION

eg: joining organisation and keeping identity as researcher secret

PROBLEM

- * gaining consent
- * deception
- * debriefing
- * right to non-participation
- * right to withdraw
- * invasion of privacy

NOT PROBLEM

- * confidentiality

NATURALISTIC OBSERVATION IN PUBLIC PLACE

eg observation of interactions in shopping centre

PROBLEM

- * gaining consent
- * debriefing
- * right to non-participation
- * right to withdraw

NOT PROBLEM

- * confidentiality
- * invasion of privacy

INTERVIEW OR QUESTIONNAIRE

eg: investigating views of health behaviour

PROBLEM

- * deception of true meaning of questionnaire
 - * invasion of privacy with personal questions
 - * protection of participants
- eg: stress of personal questions

NOT PROBLEM

- * consent
- * debriefing
- * right to non-participation
- * right to withdrawal
- * confidentiality

CASE STUDY

eg: detailed picture of individual with mental disorder

PROBLEM

- * invasion of privacy

NOT PROBLEM

- * consent
- * deception
- * debriefing
- * right to non-participation
- * right to withdraw
- * confidentiality

Table 1 - Ethical concerns with non-experimental methods.

TYPE OF RESEARCH/ EXAMPLE	DESCRIPTION	ETHICAL ISSUES
<u>SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY</u>		
aggression/imitation eg: Bandura, Ross and Ross (1961)	child shown video of adult hitting doll; child then given chance to play with doll seen	behaviour change; distress?; consent?
conformity eg: Asch (1951)	confederates give obvious wrong answer to question	deception; distress
bystander intervention eg: Latane and Darley (1968)	creating "emergency" to see who will help	deception: distress
<u>COGNITIVE PSYCHOLOGY</u>		
incidental learning eg: Craik and Tulving (1975)	not telling participants that perception experiment is really memory test	deception
eye witness testimony eg: Loftus (1975)	set up "crimes" to test recall	distress; deception
perceptual defence eg: McGinnies (1949)	taboo words shown quickly; aim to test response time to saying these words	distress; deception
<u>DEVELOPMENTAL PSYCHOLOGY</u>		
sex typing eg: Lloyd et al (1980)	parents told wrong sex of baby and their behaviour observed	deception
resistance to temptation eg: Sears et al (1965)	child left with sweets and told not to eat; see how long can resist	distress; deception; consent?
object permanence eg: Hood and Willatts (1986)	as infant reaches for object lights turned off; to see if child continues to reach in darkness	distress
<u>BIOLOGICAL PSYCHOLOGY</u>		
emotions eg: Schachter and Singer (1962)	participants given adrenaline injection, but not told real effects; aim to see attribution of arousal	deception; distress
eating behaviour eg: Schachter and Gross (1968)	participants told false info about food given	deception
stress eg: Glass and Singer (1972)	effect of noise on stress levels	distress

Table 2 - Common areas of psychology and ethical issues.

Historically there have been a number of classic pieces of research that have highlighted the ethical issues involved in research. The best known being Milgram's (1963) experiments on obedience ¹.

Neff et al (1986) mention other dramatic cases from psychological (and medical) research, which have abused participants:

- simulated plane malfunction suggesting a crash, in order to test stress;
- injection of live cancer cells into ill patients, without their consent, to study the development of anti-bodies;
- covert recordings of jury decision-making;
- 40 year study of the effects of syphilis on 4000 participants from whom treatment was withheld.

It is important to note that with each ethical issue, it is not a question of right or wrong. The guidelines are recommendations for research, and psychologists are always debating what is acceptable within those guidelines.

The general principle established by the ethical guidelines is that any researcher in psychology must consider the ethical implications and psychological consequences of the research upon the participants. It is also requires that psychologists are aware of their colleagues work, and whether the ethical guidelines are being flaunted. The key terms are "integrity" and "respect for the person".

"Taking account of their obligations under the law, they (psychologists) shall hold the interest and welfare of those in receipt of their services to be paramount at all times and ensure that the interests of participants in research are safeguarded"
(BPS 1991 p1).

The main ethical issues are listed in Table 3, while Table 4 gives some examples of research to consider as to whether it is ethical or not.

¹ There has been a change in attitudes since this research. Such that even the term "participant" is now used, whereas "subject" was used before.

- Informed Consent
- Deception
- Debriefing
- Right of non-participation
- Withdrawal from the investigation
- Confidentiality
- Privacy
- Protection of the participants from risk and stress
- Behaviour Change/Intervention
- Use of children
- Accountability
- Advice

Table 3 - Summary of the main ethical issues when performing research with humans.

In each case, what are the ethical issues involved?

1. Common ethical issues with GCSE and A Level student research:

a) Finding friend and saying "you'll help won't you?" or "I just need one more person".

b) Carrying out experiment in common room or canteen in front of other people.

c) Putting the participants' names in the report.

d) Discussing the individual results with other classmates.

2. Sitting in a library and recording the seating patterns.

3. Telling participants it is an experiment about reading comprehension, when it is really about the speed of response.

4. A confederate steals an item from a shop in front of a customer. The confederate has permission from the shopkeeper. The aim of the experiment is to see who will stop the confederate.

ANSWERS

1a. Right to non-participation

1b. Privacy and confidentiality.

1c. Confidentiality.

1d. Confidentiality.

2. Public place - no problem usually, though no right to non-participation.

3. Deception, but full debriefing may make it acceptable.

4. Deception; distress.

Table 4 - Examples of research studies and ethical issues involved.

Informed Consent

The researcher is expected to obtain the informed consent of the participants (or the parental or teacher's consent for children and adults with impairments) before the research begins. This involves giving details of all aspects likely to influence the willingness to participate.

Menges (1973) found that in 78% of 993 American psychology studies, the participants were given less than complete information about what was going to happen. While Stuart (1978) found that most students, who had taken part in experiments, could not explain what the experiments were about.

But how far does the experimenter go? How much of the details should be given to the participants before the experiment even begins? Resnick and Schwartz (1973) found by completely informing the participants beforehand, the results appeared opposite to past research findings. Furthermore, informed participants were uninterested in participating in the experiment, and were more suspicious of the experimenter.

Gardner (1978) found different results in the same experiment between a group given full details beforehand, and one with little information.

While 70% of American college students interviewed did not expect to be told the full details of the experiment, and accepted the possibility of deception (Epstein et al 1973).

Here is the problem for psychologists. They want to respect the ethical issues, but, at the same time, research is about discovering knowledge about behaviour. During an experiment, participants attempt to please the experimenter by doing what they think is required rather than behaving naturally. This is known as "demand characteristics", and is a confounding variable in any experiment. The more information the participants know beforehand, the greater the risk of "demand characteristics".

Furthermore, how does the researcher obtain consent during an observation in a public place. The point of this method is to observe without being noticed. One possibility is to seek consent after the observation, to allow use of that data. But in a busy public place, even this may not be possible.

Davison and Stuart (1975) try to resolve these problems by the use of a scale for measuring degrees of informed consent:

i) no consent is necessary - eg: observation of walking in public places;

ii) consent to be observed with no information given about research aims - eg: observation during shopping in a public place;

iii) consent to be observed with debriefing given afterwards - eg: observation of personal interactions in public place;

iv) consent after full disclosure - eg: testing of drugs;

v) consent after full disclosure with witnesses - eg: when the participants feel obliged to participate. BPS (1991) points out that researchers can appear in a position of authority, and so an individual is required in such situations to give consent;

vi) consent after full disclosure with internal committee decision - eg: the use of inmates in a prison;

vii) consent with full disclosure with external committee decision - eg: use of patients in psychiatric hospital;

viii) no consent is possible because rights of the participant cannot be protected. This is relatively rare, but may involve a situation where the participant is doing something which is beyond the control of the psychologist. This is most likely with observational studies of, for example, illegal or dangerous behaviour.

Finally, in longitudinal studies over a long period of time, informed consent must be obtained each time research is done. Thus the person is given the right to withdraw later in the study. This, unfortunately, is a major problem with longitudinal studies - the withdrawal of the participants in the middle of the study.

Deception

The issue of deceiving the participants during the research has become the most important ethical issue since the common use of deception in the 1960s, particularly in social psychology experiments. Kelman (1967) notes that the use of deception will backfire on psychology in 3 ways:

- i) participants will never believe experimenters, even when the experimenters are being truthful;
- ii) psychology generally cannot be believed;
- iii) research becomes a game of participant versus experimenter: who is telling the truth?

The BPS (1991) points out that deception is inappropriate if it leads to discomfort, anger or objections by the participants when the deception is revealed.

Menges (1973) reviewed 993 studies published in six main American psychological journals and found that nearly 90% had used some form of deception; ie: either incomplete or inaccurate information given to the participants (see table 5). Only 3% had given complete information about the independent variable and 22% about the dependent variable. Other researchers have looked at the use of deception in experiments.

TYPE OF DECEPTION	% OF STUDIES USING DECEPTION
purpose of study	10.8
participant's own behaviour	30.8
information about others	34.6
instruments	23.8

Table 5 - Types of deception used in 993 American psychological studies; (source: table 2 p1033 Menges 1973).

Gross and Fleming (1982) found that in 691 psychology studies in the 1960s and 1970s, most had used a false cover story as the only deception. Thus there is a distinction with the use of deception.

The situation seems to be better today. Brewer (2001), in a study of the 57 articles published in the "British Journal of Social Psychology" in 1991, suggested that three studies stood out as possibly violating the ethical guidelines:

- a) one study gave the participants false information

about their success on a task in order to manipulate their self-esteem, mainly downwards;

b) in another study, individuals were approached in the street, to fill in a questionnaire, by experimenters wearing a pro-gay badge or not;

c) students filmed without their knowledge during a study.

Gerdes (1979) found that 655 USA college students, who had just participated in experiments involving deception, were generally positive about their experiences. Gale (1994) suggests that this study and others "seem to indicate that student populations are less concerned about the ethicality of some aspects of psychological research than are psychologists or learned societies" (pp1169-70).

The BPS (1991) distinguish between withholding some of the details of the hypothesis, and falsely informing participants of the purpose of the experiment as more benign than it really is. This is generally taken to mean "simple" versus "extreme" deception.

Simple deception, which is seen as more acceptable, involves withholding minor information or directly lying about a small part of the experiment. For example, telling participants the wrong sex of a baby, or not telling participants that there would be a memory test after the experimental task (Fraik and Tulving 1975).

While extreme deception has more serious consequences. Brunel (1962) told male participants false information about their physiological reactions to photos of men; ie: suggesting that some were homosexual. Some of the participants may have been disturbed by such knowledge, even if it was contradicted in the debriefing after the experiment.

Jones and Segall (1971) made use of a technique known as the "bogus pipeline" in measuring attitudes. Participants were connected to a machine, which they were told could discern if they were lying or not. The machine could not do this, and researchers were using information about the participants collected elsewhere (for example from attitude questionnaires filled in at other times).

In drug research, one group (the placebo group) is led to believe they are being given the substance when they are not. However this is seen as more acceptable, as participants are usually aware that a placebo is being used.

Many researchers argue that deception is a necessary evil in order to gain accurate results. This has led the

American Psychological Association (1973) to list five conditions that may make deception acceptable:

- i) the research problem is of great importance;
- ii) the research cannot be accomplished without deception;
- iii) there is sufficient reason to believe that the participants will not be distressed when later finding out about the deception;
- iv) the participants still have the right to withdraw from the experiment at any time;
- v) the experimenter takes full responsibility for removing any stressful after effects of the experiment.

Deception is not just a problem for experimental research, it is also an issue with participant observations (PO). Here the researcher observes a group or situation by being part of that group or situation, and this usually involves hiding their identity as a researcher. But such behaviour allows the observation of otherwise closed situations.

The best known examples, which have produced important findings, are Rosenhan (1972) "On Being Sane in Insane Places", and Festinger et al (1956) "When Prophecy Fails" (see Box 1).

RESEARCHERS: Festinger, Reicken and Schachter (1956)

AIM: To observe a real life situation where deeply held beliefs are challenged to see how attitudes would change.

METHOD: In October of the year of the study, the three researchers joined a small group of 10-20 people, led by "Mrs. Keech", who believed the world would end at dawn on 21st December that year, and the group would be saved by people from the planet Clarion. The researchers point out that because of the group's "secrecy and general attitude towards nonbelievers made it clear that a study could not be conducted openly" (p234). Thus the researchers pretended to be believers.

RESULTS: When the end of the world did not come, the group believed that their efforts of "spreading light" had saved the world, and members became more active (instead of less) in trying to convert new members.

CONCLUSION: This research is the basis of the theory of cognitive dissonance (Festinger 1957). In situations of conflict between attitudes and events, people will change their attitudes in an unusual direction.

Box 1 - Details of Festinger et al 1956.

Davis (1970) reports a case of six sociology students joining Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) in New York, and is very critical of such research for showing a tacit disrespect for AA.

Because of the concerns about deception, psychologists have looked for alternative methods of study.

ALTERNATIVES TO DECEPTION

1. Role playing

In the 1970s attempts were made to use role playing. The experimenter describes the situation to the participants who then play out the situation as themselves or as others. A well known example is Geller (1978), which is detailed in Box 2.

RESEARCHER: Geller (1978)

AIM: To try a replication of Milgram's experiment on obedience using role playing.

METHOD: 91 adult males aged between 20-60 years were recruited by adverts in New York City for a small payment. They were chosen if they had no knowledge of the Milgram experiment. Beforehand they filled out the "Role-Playing Ability Scale". All participants knew that the learner in the experiment was a confederate (ie working for the experimenter), and that the machine was not giving real electric shocks. The participants then role-played three of Milgram's conditions - the basic condition, the experimenter absent condition, and the victim limited contract condition (ie: the university released from responsibility for what happens in the experiment).

RESULTS: Similar levels of obedience was found to those in Milgram's original experiment, particularly for those participants "involved" in the role-playing.

Table showing the percentage of participants who obeyed in Geller's experiment

	GELLER	MILGRAM
Basic experiment	51.29	65
Experimenter absent	33.30	22.50
Victim limited contract	50	40

CONCLUSION: "Role-playing methods may then take their place among the many acceptable methods available to researchers and be viewed as alternatives to deception rather than replacements for it" (p233).

Box 2 - Details of Geller 1978.

However, it is difficult to judge who is "involved". Generally though, this method is not used very often

because of its problems. Namely that it is not the same as the real experiment - all that is happening is "people's guesses as to how they would behave if they were in a particular situation" (Freedman 1969). Because many participants do not become "involved" in the scenarios, there is a tendency to choose participants who are good at role playing. But this is not longer a random sample.

2. Simulation studies

This is a variation on role playing, but over a longer period of time or in a real situation. For example, the Stanford Prison Simulation (Haney et al 1973) is technically this type of study. The participants agreed to play prisoners or prison officers over a 14 day period in a jail built in the basement of Stanford University Psychology Department.

While Kelman (1967) has used this method in an Inter-Nation Simulation. Participants acted as leaders of nations faced with negotiations and problem-solving tasks.

3. Informing participants about possible deception

Campbell (1969) suggests warning future participants that there may be deception, but not what deception will be involved. The best known example here is Gamson et al (1982). They were studying "group rebellion" using a deceptive market research situation. As the participants took part in a group discussion, the situation became more and more difficult. The aim was to see when the group would refuse to continue. The researchers had got permission to deceive the participants indirectly by asking them first over the phone if they would be happy to be involved in research in which "you will be misled about the purpose until afterwards".

In a way, this method still involves deception, but it is an attempt to deal with the problem of deception.

4. Getting the participants perspective on the experiment

5. "Honest experiments"

This method can be used in two ways. Firstly, making the participants completely aware of the purposes of the research.

Byrne et al (1970) studied the importance of similarity in physical attractiveness using the "computer

dance" technique. At an American college dance, students are randomly given "blind dates" to see who likes who, and who will continue to date. The students are aware that they are being studied.

Alternatively, to make use of natural occurring situation. For example, Baum et al (1983) studied the stress of living near Three Mile Island nuclear power station in USA after the near disaster of a meltdown.

To the scientific psychologist, all these methods are unacceptable because of the risk of "demand characteristics". The BPS (1991) is aware of this conflict between ethics and research:

"since there are very many psychological processes that are modifiable by individuals if they are aware that they are being studied, the statement of the research hypothesis in advance of the collection of data would make much psychological research impossible"(BPS 1991 p5).

Debriefing

After the completion of the experiment, it is expected that the participants will be given full details of the experiment. This is known as the debriefing. The BPS (1991) emphasise the importance of appropriate debriefing, which may require more than just verbal explanations, but also "active intervention".

"The investigator should discuss with the participants their experience of the research in order to monitor any unforeseen negative effects or misconceptions" (p9).

Holmes (1976) points out that there are two main aspects of any debriefing:

- dehoaxing: the correction of fraudulent information used;
- desensitizing: help participants deal with new knowledge of the self gained through the experiment, especially if it is negative.

However, there is the existence of the perseverance effect which challenges the effectiveness of dehoaxing. This effect is that first impressions remain despite information contrary later.

For example, participants are told that they scored badly on an IQ test in the experiment, in order to see their reaction to other tests. In the debriefing, they are informed that the IQ test scores were average. With the perseverance effect, there is a tendency is to believe that they scored badly on the IQ test as the truth.

An experiment by Ring et al (1970) has questioned the effectiveness of general debriefings. Fifty-seven undergraduates were used in an obedience experiment that involved making a loud noise in a victim's ear, and afterwards were given one of three debriefings. One group were not debriefed at all, the second group were given the traditional factual debriefing, and the last group received a traditional factual debriefing and explanations for their obedience behaviour. The first two groups were equally upset by the experiment when interviewed later, and 70% of them were suspicious about other experiments.

Thus a simple factual debriefing may not be enough when the participants have been involved in a very emotionally upsetting experiment or where they have behaved unexpectedly for themselves.

The BPS (1991) is also clear that the use of a detailed debriefing should not be a justification for unethical research.

Right of Non-Participation

Participants should be allowed not to participate in the research if they want. Traditionally in American universities, psychology students were coerced into participating as part of their course credits. Menges (1973) estimated that 40% of participants were from "course requirements" in 993 studies published in 1971.

This has led the APA (1992) to emphasise the need to give participants the choice of research projects to join in situations like that, and that they must receive some reward for participating. Students are still the most commonly used participants in the USA (and the UK) because of the ease of access by psychologists at the universities.

Often the psychologist may appear as an authority figure (eg: teacher using their pupils for research), and though the psychologist asks if the participants want to join the research, the participants feel obliged to. This has led to committees making decisions in situations like the use of patients in psychiatric hospitals.

With observational research in public places, participants do not have this right to non-participation. One possibility is to allow the retrospective withdrawal of the data after the event.

Withdrawal from the Investigation

This ethical issue is closely linked to the previous one. Participants should be made aware that they can withdraw at any time. Thus their decision to participate does not mean that they have to stay to the end.

However, research like Milgram's experiments on obedience have shown that the power of the situation can influence people's behaviour. The participants may have the right to withdraw, but the pressure of the situation means they do not.

Implicitly the researchers are pressurising the participants to continue until the end, or even sometimes explicitly criticising people who leave half way through the research.

It can be difficult for the researcher, particularly with a long term study of many years, if participants withdraw in the middle, and thus none of their data can be used at the completion of the research.

Confidentiality

Any information given by the participants during the research should be kept confidential by the researchers. This involves using numbers to refer to each participant rather than their names. In some cases, even the researcher does not know the participant's name.

If it is a study of one individual, like in a case study, then a pseudonym or initials should be used; eg: "HM" or "Little Hans".

"In the event that confidentiality and/or anonymity cannot be guaranteed, the participants must be warned of this in advance of agreeing to participate" (BPS 1991 p10).

But even without naming names, it could be obvious who is who in the research. Vidich and Bensman (1958) produced a detailed Participant Observation of a small USA town. They gave it the name "Springdale", and none of the residents were named. The report was so detailed that the residents themselves knew who was who, and who had said what.

Alternatively, the researcher may learn certain knowledge during the research that might be linked to a future crime or the participants injuring themselves. Then there is a moral issue as to whether the researcher should inform someone. Melton (1988) highlights the particular problems related to research into AIDS. For example, if the individual is keeping the disease hidden but still continuing to have unprotected sexual intercourse.

Legally in the UK (at the time of writing), any data stored by computer comes under the Data Protection Act 1984. If an individual is identifiable from that data, then the individual themselves can see that information through application to the Data Protection Registrar.

Privacy

The participants' privacy must be respected by the researcher. With interview and questionnaire research, this involves not asking more than is necessary for the aims of the research, or if personal questions are being asked, then participants can have the right to refuse to answer.

Privacy is also an issue in observational research. It is assumed that if a person is in a public place, where they are seen by others, then it is acceptable to observe them. But what about public toilets - they are public, but individuals would not expect to be formally observed?

Middlemist et al (1976) performed research on personal space in men's public toilets. They wanted to know if participants would behave differently in a crowded or empty public toilet.

In a crowded toilet, it was found that men took longer to start urinating when standing at the urinal, and urinated for a shorter time than in an empty toilet. The researchers defend themselves, in terms of ethics, by saying that the participants' faces could not be seen, only the lower torso and the stream of urine.

Psychologists argue that it is important to discover all about human behaviour, but does this research tell us anything useful? To quote the researchers: "These findings provide objective evidence that personal space invasion produces physiological changes associated with arousal" (p541).

Protection of the Participants from Risk and Stress

The BPS (1991) emphasise that the researcher is responsible for protecting the participants from physical and mental harm during the research.

In particular:

"the risk of harm must be no greater than in ordinary life ie: participants should not be exposed to risks greater than or additional to those encountered in their normal lifestyles" (p10).

If the risk is greater, then the researcher must gain the permission of an independent party for the research.

After the research, the participants should be told how to seek help if they need it later. Preferably the researcher should remove any negative consequences before the research is finished. Even greater concern should be applied with children.

The risk to participants can appear in two forms - physical and psychological. The physical risk could involve injury or health effects. In the experiment known as "Little Albert" (Watson and Rayner 1924), a 9 month old child was deliberately terrorised by a loud noise when a white rat appeared. This led to a nervous reaction of fear towards the rat. The experimenters were successful in showing that fears and phobias are classically conditioned. The experiment was performed without the consent of the child's mother, who removed the child when she found out. Albert was left to live with a fear of white rats, rabbits, cotton wool, and white hair.

Other research that risks physical harm includes studies on the effect of alcohol or drugs on behaviour.

The second type of risk is psychological, and there are many more studies which have caused this. For example, it is common to alter the self-esteem of participants in order to see how they behave. Usually it involves reducing self-esteem by falsely telling the participants they have failed a test (deception), and then giving them another task to do. Not surprisingly, people do worse on the second task than if their self-esteem is bolstered.

Walster (1965) used female college students who were asked for a date by an attractive man. The female students responded differently to the man depending on the false feedback given on a personality test they had

just completed. But how did they feel when they found it was an experiment (using deception).

Hayes (1995) sees this study as showing a lack of respect for the participants, and a "gratuitous use of deception".

Altering self-esteem is common in the classic social psychological studies, as is deliberately frustrating the participants to measure their subsequent level of aggression.

Behaviour Change/Intervention

In some research situations, the experimenter induces behaviour change in the participants as part of the experiment. Care has to be taken if it is a negative change in the participants, and this should be removed before the end of the experiment.

For example, Leyens et al (1975) showed a group of boys violent videos, and then measured the boys' aggressive behaviour. The videos did produce changes in behaviour, and this will continue after they leave the debriefing.

Use of Children in Research

Extra care should be taken when using children in research, particularly young children. The parents or teachers must give consent, and also be available to withdraw the child if the research is distressing them. Young children cannot speak for themselves and ask to leave the research.

However hard the researcher tries, they are an adult and will appear as an authority figure to the child. Children are eager to please and obey such figures. It makes it quite easy for the child to end up doing things they do not want to do.

Accountability

This is the wider issue that involves psychologists being aware that their research has implications for participants, and psychologists' responsibilities.

Marshall (1986) argues that research is performed for three groups - the "research community", the individual researcher, and for the participants. Feminist research aims to empower the participants by helping them to realise their own copyright to, for example, taped interviews.

The APA (1992) pointed out that psychologists should be aware of their own values and beliefs, and the effect of these on their work.

Concar (1996) reports a proposal in Canada that participants would have the right to withdraw their data if they did not like what they heard in the debriefing. However, this may mean that participants withdraw their data because they disagree with the researcher rather than concerned with the ethics.

Also research on minority groups would require permission of the leaders first. However, this could block research into cults, gangs, and extremist groups. This is an issue faced by Festinger et al in their Participation Observation of a religious group (see Box 1).

FEMINIST RESEARCH

Feminist researchers are concerned with issues of exploitation during research. For example, to go beyond informed consent to include the use made of the research. The criticism by feminist research is that traditional ("malestream") research takes little account of its misuse of participants.

"All elements of the research need to be fully disclosed, including your position and involvement as a researcher in the issue, the purpose of the research, what is involved, how it is to be conducted, the number of participants, the time it is likely to take, and importantly, what is to happen to the material collected..(Others) claim such information contaminates the subsequent material gained, but it is inevitable that people will construct their own understanding of what is going on"

(Banister et al 1994 p153).

There are a number of issues that are important to feminist researchers:

i) power relations in research - the researcher may feel

that they are on equal terms with the participants, but researcher may appear as an authority figure or has status in the eyes of the participants.

"The aim here is to equalise the power relations, to democratize the process to the extent that we can and do ensure that there is no exploitation" (Banister et al 1994 p154).

One way is to make the participants aware that they own the copyright of the taped interview.

In fact, feminist researchers prefer to use the term "co-researcher" instead of participant. Thus the participant is invited to help in the interpretation of the results. This approach is better for qualitative methods, like unstructured interviews.

ii) accountability - it is important for feminist researchers to make themselves accountable, first and foremost, to the participants. In other words, the rights of the participants are placed above all other pressures and demands of the research - the researcher themselves or the funding body of the research. The integrity of the researcher becomes as important as the findings themselves.

iii) outcome of the research - rather than just worrying about removing negative effects of the research, feminist researchers aim for outcomes that will bring positive benefits to the participants. This is sometimes called "consciousness-raising", and involves the improvement of the individual's life by making them more aware of issues in their lives. This can happen to both the participant and the researcher.

Advice

The BPS (1991) emphasises two aspects in its code of conduct here. Firstly, if the researcher becomes aware of a psychological or physical problem with the participant, of which the participant is unaware, then the "investigator has a responsibility to inform the participants if the investigator believes that by not doing so the participant's future wellbeing may be endangered" (p11).

Secondly, if the issue is serious, the researcher should not offer advice where they are not qualified to do so, but refer the participant to a qualified person. For example, a research psychologist is not necessarily qualified to give therapy.

Miscellaneous Issues

LANGUAGE

The BPS (1991) ethical guidelines also contains a section on the language used in articles and research reports.

"Help the reader focus on the content of your paper by avoiding language that may cause irritation, flights of thought, or even momentary interruptions.. Avoid heavy alliteration, accidental rhyming, poetic expressions and cliches" (BPS 1991 p17).

Most importantly, psychologists are encouraged to use non-sexist language. For example, "average man" could be replaced by "average person", "mankind" by "people", or "manpower" by "workforce". The same ideas apply for non-discriminatory language generally.

FRAUD

It is an increasing concern throughout science that researchers may be inventing their data. In a general survey of 2600 scientific researchers in the USA in 1993, 8% reported knowing instances of other researchers plagiarising or falsifying data. While in another, more recent, USA survey, over half of 400 medical researchers knew of cases where colleagues had cheated on clinical trials (both reported in Cohen 1999).

What about fraud in psychology? One of the best known public cases is that of Cyril Burt and his research on intelligence and identical twins. Kamin (1977) analysed the research, finding inconsistencies, which suggested fraud. For example, the invention of research assistants used in the study. However, Joynson (1989) has defended Burt against the charges of fraud.

While in parapsychology, Markwick (1978) found the original data sheets of Samuel Soal (University of London 1930s-50s) altered to give better results in ESP experiments.

Conclusion

Reason and Rowan (1981) suggest a simple line on ethical issues - "good research means never having to say you are sorry".

While Aronson (1999) sums up the guidelines on ethics:

"The experimenter must take steps to ensure that participants leave the experimental situation in a frame of mind that is at least as sound as it was when they entered".

Reynolds (1982) holds up three criteria for ethics in research:

i) "utilitarian, cost-benefit criteria" - is more learnt about human behaviour in this research, than if it was carried out another way, and if so, is it worth it? In other words, how important are the findings compared to the experiences of the participants?

ii) outcome to the participants - what is the effect of the research upon the participants and their life?

iii) integrity of the experimenter - can the researcher maintain their integrity knowing how the results were collected?

Studies that Produced Ethical Debates

MILGRAM DEBATE

The psychology experiment which has caused the greatest debate about ethics in research was performed by Stanley Milgram in the 1960s. Milgram set up a situation where ordinary people appeared to give increasing intensity electric shocks to a man in the next room.

Though no electric shocks were actually given, for the participants, they believed the scenario. Milgram (1963) admits that the participants:

"were observed to sweat, tremble, stutter, bite their lips, groan and dig their fingernails into their flesh. These were characteristic rather than exceptional responses to the experiment" (p377).

Psychologists even now are divided about the rights and wrongs of this experiment. Erikson (1968) calls it a "momentous and meaningful contribution to our knowledge of human behaviour". Elms (1972) feels that it is the "most morally significant research in modern psychology". In fact, Brown (1986) feels that Milgram should be praised "for doing research of the highest human consequences while showing great concern for the welfare of subjects".

From a different point of view, Baumrind (1971) argues that:

"Fundamental moral principles of reciprocity and justice are violated, when the research psychologist, using his position of trust, acts to deceive or degrade" (p890).

Milgram (1964) defends himself: "the problem of destructive obedience, because it is the most disturbing expression of obedience in our time and because it is the most perplexing, merits intensive study". This is often seen as the "end justifies the means" argument.

Diana Baumrind was the most critical of Milgram. In a series of articles in the 1960s, they fought out the arguments. Here is a summary of the three main arguments (with evaluative comments):

1. Baumrind - the anguish and distress caused to the participants was an unacceptable level.

Milgram - did not intend the stress, and had no idea of the outcome.

Comment - Milgram did not know the outcome initially, but he performed 18 different versions of the experiment over many years.

2. Baumrind - potential permanent psychological damage caused to the participants.

Milgram - the participants were debriefed after the experiment. Also they were visited by a psychiatrist 1 year after, who found no evidence of mental illness caused by the experiment.

Comment - the experiment may not have caused major psychological problems, but individual's self-esteem may have been lowered leaving a general negative feeling about themselves.

3. Baumrind - no informed consent for what actually happened in the experiment.

Milgram - afterwards participants reported being glad to have taken part in the experiment. 84% said they were "glad" or "very glad" compared to 1.3% for "sorry" or "very sorry" to have taken part. 74% felt they had learned something of personal importance.

Comment - how do we know that the questionnaire replies were not a product of obedience, in the same way as the obedience in the experiment?

Conclusion - Aronson (1999) asks the question of whether ethics would be so important in this experiment if none of the participants had obeyed.

ZIMBARDO DEBATE

Another piece of research that received a lot of attention is the Stanford Prison Simulation (Haney et al 1973). Here students acted out prisoners or prison officers in a mock jail. It was stopped after six days because of the "brutality" of the prison guards.

For example, prisoners were forced to clean the toilets with their bare hands; they were sprayed with fire extinguishers; they were made to do "push-ups" with guards stepping on them.

The students had agreed to take part (informed consent), and they knew that the research was being filmed. The "prisoners" knew they would be locked up for 14 days (no deception). The only deception was the local police "arresting" the "prisoners" in their homes. There was a full debriefing of the participants and long term follow-up to check for ill effects. Obviously the "prisoners" had no right to withdraw.

Though the research was stopped earlier than planned, it could be argued that the research should have stopped even earlier. The evidence of mistreatment by the prison officers was there from the first days.

Savin (1973) has been most critical of the research, suggesting that it aided the careers of the experimenters:

"in pursuit of their own academic interests and professional advancement, deceive, humiliate and otherwise mistreat their students" (p149).

Of the three experimenters, Philip Zimbardo has become the most famous, and much of that fame comes from this research.

Zimbardo (1973) replied to the criticism of Savin by emphasising the importance of the findings:

"a great many prisoners, former inmates, legislators, criminal lawyers and parole officers have gone on record endorsing the findings and implications of our study" (p250).

McDermott (1993) argues that the question has now changed from "who will mistreat others?" to "what are the circumstances under which anyone would behave

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